

# Argument

When you hear the word "argument", your first thought might be of people disagreeing, even yelling at each other - or worse!

Logicians (that is, people who study reasoning) tend to use the word rather differently. Roughly, an argument in this sense is what people provide when they try to show that some claim is true - or alternatively, that some claim is false. For our purposes<sup>1</sup>,

**An argument is an integrated set of reasons or objections bearing upon some claim.**

We use the term contention for claim upon which an argument bears.

What does it mean to "bear on" a contention? It just means that the argument has been presented by somebody as relevant to whether the contention is true or not.

Reasons and objections are themselves sets of claims, known as premises. So it is possible to think of an argument as a structured set of claims bearing upon a contention.

### Simple and Complex

In the simplest case, an argument would be just a single reason, or a single objection. We refer to these as *simple* arguments. *Complex* arguments are made up of multiple reasons or objections connected in an integrated structure.

### Good Arguments and Bad

Not all arguments are good arguments! Good arguments are ones that give us a solid basis for believing or disbelieving the contention. Bad arguments are ones that don't. Evaluation is the process by which we judge whether an argument is good or bad.

### What are arguments for?

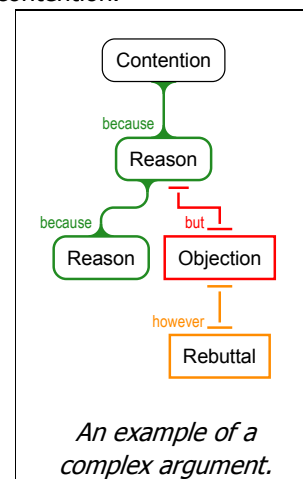
Arguments are attempts to trace the web of implications among our ideas - that is, how accepting some claims should affect our acceptance of others. Thus a simple argument with one reason says, roughly, that if you believe the premises, you'd better also believe the contention.

Arguments are used in a number of different ways, including:

- **To justify.** Suppose I want to show that my belief in a certain claim is appropriate. I can use arguments to show that the claim is true because it is supported by other claims which are true. In other words, I can use arguments to justify my claim.
- **To persuade.** Arguments can be used in the attempt to persuade another person to believe (or reject) some claim. This activity is argumentation.
- **To infer.** Arguments can be used to extend our knowledge by showing that some claims we already believe provide evidence for another claim. This process of drawing out the implications of what we know by chains of arguments is inference.

### Arguments and Argumentation

The word "argument" is often used to refer to a disputatious activity, as in "There was an argument going on about who should inherit the old man's Bucatti." Argument as an activity of course involves arguments in the sense of sets of reasons and objections. To distinguish these subtly different notions, we refer to the activity of argument as argumentation.



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<sup>1</sup> Our definitions here differ slightly from what you might find in standard logic textbooks. Logicians typically refer to the claim, upon which an argument bears, as the *conclusion*, and define an argument as *a set of claims, one of which is a conclusion and the others of which provide evidence for that conclusion*. We believe of course that the usage recommended here is more natural and useful.